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Freedom to Connect Conference

"Who uses the internet, what they do, and what it means"

I assume that many of you are here because you have little doubt that people's use of new technologies can be socially and economically transformative. Scholars have found that new tools of communication and information dissemination do these things:

- The role of experts and information gatekeepers is radically altered as empowered amateurs and dissidents find new ways to raise their voices and challenge authority.
- Attempts by those in power to censor activity and choke off new avenues of commerce inevitably bring a wider libertarian backlash and, eventually, new social and political institutions form.
- There is a struggle to revise social and legal norms, and the battles center on the concept of intellectual property.
- Cultures of identity multiply as people use the new technologies to find others who share their background or their passions or their lifestyle.
- New forms of language arise.
- New ways to pursue scientific study and new scholarly disciplines emerge as knowledge spreads much more quickly.
- Boundaries break down between the private and the public spheres of life.
- Literacy grows and new emphasis is placed on training and educating children.
- New professions emerge.

Of course I'm citing the work of the wonderful historian Elizabeth Eisenstein in her study of the impact of the printing press in 15th and 16th Century Europe.[1]

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[1] Eisenstein, Elizabeth, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe,* Cambridge University Press, 1993

She has helped us become more aware that each succeeding wave of information technology brings more change. The telegraph dramatically cut the importance of distance by unhooking information from transportation (mainly horses, wind, and steam engines). It ushered in the era of modern news reporting, and helped tie people together in national cultures. The telephone facilitated the creation of skyscrapers and suburbs. Radio and television created mass markets and prompted significant shifts in work, leisure, and the way people allocated their time.

The story of the mass adoption of the internet in America is one that in interesting ways is even more potent than those other modern technologies.

It took radio 38 years to attract an audience of 50 million Americans. It took television 13 years. It took the web less than four years from the moment when the Netscape browser became widely available in October 1994 to hit the 50 million mark.

According to data from our latest poll that was delivered to me Friday – a survey that was completed on March 21 – 136 million American adults now use the internet. That is 67% of those 18 and older. And our surveys from last fall show that 87% of teens (those ages 12-17) are online.

An even fresher adoption story has arisen in the past five years as broadband connections proliferated. Again, this most recent survey, we find that 59 million Americans have high-speed connections at home. That is just over 50% of home users.

This is enormously important because we know that the better the quality of a person's connection, the more important the internet becomes in their lives. Broadband connections influence people's behavior online -- in and of themselves and stripping out all the other unique demographic attributes of broadband users. High-speed, always-on connections amplify and intensify internet use:

- People spend more time logged on
- They go online more often; and do more activities more frequently
- They feel better about the Internet's role in their lives
- They change the way they allocate their time
- They create and share content

- They consume multimedia presentations
- They multitask
- They transfer offline activities online

Adoption data are only the beginning of the story. The real tale is in the multitude of things that people do when they use the internet. If yesterday was like a typical week day online, nearly 82 million American adults (or 60% of the U.S. internet-using population and 40% of the entire adult population) logged online and here's some of what they did:

- 71 million of those folks used email – about nine times the number who sent or received personal mail through the postal system
- 41 million used a search engine – more than ten times the number who went to a public library[2]
- 40 million got news, about half the number who got news on broadcast or cable TV station, and about two-thirds the number of people who read a daily newspaper. Eventually the lines will cross. In fact, young home broadband users are MORE LIKELY to get the news online than from a print or broadcast outlet.
- 30 million checked the weather
- 16 million did some online banking – about five times the number who visited a bank.
- 15 million exchanged instant messages
- 9-10 million got health information that helped them make an important medical decision in their lives – three times as many who visit doctors or clinics or hospitals on a typical day.
- 4 million googled somebody they were about to meet.
- Finally, 1 million people did one or another of the following things:

  o Took an online class for college credit
  o Researched their family's genealogy
  o Arranged a romantic date through an online matchmaking service

Another way to look at how the internet has been woven into our economic, social, and civic life can be found in these realms:

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[2] 2001 statistics from National Center for Education Statistics, cited at:
http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2003/2003399.pdf

- 79 million have participated in online support groups involving medical conditions or sharing experiences about personal problems they are having.
- 75 million people used the internet during the last election season to get news and information about the campaign, to swap email comments about the candidates, or participate directly in the election process. That is a doubling of the audience from just four years ago.
- 48 million have used email recently for spiritual/religious discussion – many of them were making prayer requests or responding to prayer requests
- 38 million have sent email to government officials to try to influence policy decisions.
- 15 million have made online donations to religious organizations – 7 million have made political donations

Then, there are the wholly new things that the internet has enabled that have never quite been done – or certainly observed this way before. Yesterday, it is likely that:

- 6-9 million posted or shared some kind of material on the web through blogging or other content-creating applications. A lot of new people are entering the civic commons through their creations online.
- 5-8 million swapped music and movie files on peer-to-peer networks.
- 3 million used the internet to rate a person, product or service on sites ranging from the path-breaking E-pinions to the favorite with teens: amihotornot.com.

    o Then there is **rate my professors.com,** ever-popular with college students. One recent posting about one hapless English literature teacher was, "I learned how to hate a language I already know."
    o Or this about a geology teacher: "BORING! But I learned there are 137 tiles on the ceiling."
    o Or this about a math teacher: "Not only is the book a better teacher, it also has a better personality."

This data dump from me points to a central truth about the web as it enters the age of adolescence: **Internet use in America is the norm.** We know this

partly because it is getting harder to talk to people about "being online." In the age of always-on broadband connections and where 1 in 5 Americans owns a laptop with a wireless connection and where 36 million use their cell phones for text messaging, we are having some trouble figuring how to ask people, "Do you use the internet – and how often are you online?"

Another challenge for internet researchers is that there is a surprising amount of churn in the online population. I am often asked, "What are the big surprises in your surveys?" And the Number 1 surprise is that a fifth of the 65 million people who do not use the internet **live in a household with an internet connection – and there are other members of the family who do use the internet.**

Another 17% of **NON-**internet users say they did use the internet at some point in their lives but have now stopped. Similarly, more than a quarter of today's internet users say that there was at least one time in their online life when they stopped using the internet for a significant period.

Let's linger for a moment in the general vicinity of digital gaps because it is central to this gathering. There are nine gaps that have persisted from the earliest days of internet adoption – indeed, the only gap that has vanished relates to sex. Women caught up to men online in 2000 and now are slightly more likely than men to be internet users. But even as the total internet population has grown, it is still possible to identify these digital divides:

- **1 - Age – the young rule**
- **2 - Employment status – college students and full time workers rule**
- **3 - Educational attainment – college grads rule**
- **4 - Income level – those in households over $75,000 rule**
- **5 - Disability – the able-bodied rule**
- **6 - Language – English rules**
- **7 - Community type – rural lags**
- **8 - Parental status – parents rule**
- **9 - Race and ethnicity – minorities lag**

So … many are connected. Some are not. The question arises: What does all that connectivity do to people and for people? I'd like to highlight four broad areas of internet impact that we have discovered in our work.

The first impact is that the use of the internet is associated with growth in <u>social capital</u>. People use email to enhance connection and increase communication. Email users, especially women, feel they are working on relationships and tending to their social networks, as they exchange email.

In addition to being a bonding agent for relationships, the internet is a bridging agent for the creation and sustenance of community. 84% of internet users belong to groups that have an online dimension – that represents close to 115 million people. More than half have joined those groups since getting internet access and those who were group members before getting access say their use of the internet has bound them closer to the group.

In those groups, they are very likely to meet people outside their social class, outside their racial or ethnic group, and outside their generational cohort.

We are soon going to be releasing findings that show how the internet helps people expand their social networks and benefit from them when they want to solve problems or need assistance.

The second impact we have discovered is that people use the internet more seriously as they gain experience. As a result, their enthusiasm and reliance on the internet grow. There are several dimensions to this growing seriousness. Users' work-related use of the internet grows. The variety of their online activities expands. Their email content becomes more consequential. For instance, over time they are more likely to use email to express worries or seek advice on decisions or problems. And they are more likely to perform more financial transactions online.

There seems to be a kind of Newtonian law of connection: A body in connection tends to get ever-more connected.

The third impact, and arguably the most consequential, relates to the way people use the internet to take care of their health. E-patients are creating a new health care environment where the old medical model – the all-wise, omnipotent, expert doctor tells *patients* what's best for them – is being supplanted by a new model where empowered patients get large amounts of information, advice, support online and act as partners with their doctors in making healthcare decisions.

And the fourth impact relates to civic life. E-citizens are creating a new "town square" where innovative and widely-varying information sources and mobilization tactics are reshaping politics and community life. Nowhere is that more evident that in the rise of blogs in this past campaign season. Yet, blogs are hardly the whole story. On Web sites, in discussion groups, and on listservs…. everywhere you turn it seems there is a new civic storm arising from the quick-to-organize and quick-to-mobilize online community. This truly is the era of "smart mobs."

One final dimension to the internet's role in the creation of social capital involves civic engagement. We do not have the longitudinal evidence to say this authoritatively yet, but our examination of the internet's role in the last election suggests that internet use for political activity is tied to civic participation. We might be able to show eventually that a quantifiable number of people vote in elections because their use of the internet.

I don't want to leave the impression that connection is nothing but a joy ride. Important and interesting work by Prof. Bob Kraut's team at the HomeNet Project at Carnegie Mellon University suggests that heavy internet use is associated with higher levels of stress. Beyond that, it is very clear that bad people can find abundant ways to use the internet to cause harm – physical, emotional, and financial.

Sometimes the harm results directly from being connected – think SPAM and SPYWARE.

And the jury is still out on the long-term social impact of micro-media. As information volume increases and source multiply, will that compel people to retreat to their preferred "information warrens" where they only encounter people and information that supports their view of the world? We did a study last year that says that isn't happening. The internet is a door-opener to information and social inputs that are contrary to users' belief systems. But that is not the final word on this subject.

As a final thought, I'd like to take you back 25 years to the issues raised by the great political scientist Ithiel de Sola Pool. In his landmark, "Technologies of Freedom: On free speech in the electronic age," he wrote:

"The onus is on us to determine whether free societies in the twenty-first century will conduct electronic communication under the conditions of freedom established for the domain of print through centuries of struggle, or whether that great achievement will become lost in a confusion about the new technologies."

This gathering is one of those all-too-rare events where those confusions about new technologies can be beaten back and where essential first principles can be made to shine.

Thank you.